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AUTHOR Vande Kamp, Mark E.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem is widely perceived to be important. This study examined the role of self-esteem as a moderator of social behavior in a sample selected to represent a broad range on the self-esteem dimension. Student subjects representing high, medium, and low levels of self-esteem were selected from a large sample (N=1,051) such that those characterized as low in self-esteem expressed negative self-attitudes. All subjects selected completed seven paper-and-pencil tasks measuring well-known and reliable psychological phenomena. Self-esteem was found to moderate three out of six phenomena that were replicated: (1) acceptance of more responsibility for desired than for undesired outcomes; (2) the false-consensus effect; and (3) unrealistic optimism concerning future life events. Attitude-consistency of cognitive responses to persuasion, primacy in impression formation, and beneffectance for social events were not moderated by self-esteem. No conclusions could be drawn about possible moderating effects of self-esteem on opinion change following counter-attitudinal role playing and attitude similarity/attraction. The results showed that when subjects with a wide range in self-esteem were tested, self-esteem was an important moderator of social behavior. (Author/ABL)

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# IS HIGH SELF-ESTEEM A PRECONDITION OF "NORMAL" BEHAVIOR?

Mark E. Vande Kamp, Katherine L. Kerr, & Anthony G. Greenwald

University of Washington
Department of Psychology, NI-25
Seattle, WA 98195 (206) 543-7753

**Abstract.** Subjects representing high, medium, and low levels of self-esteem were selected from a large sample ($n$ = 1051) such that those characterized as low in self-esteem expressed negative self-attitudes. All subjects selected completed seven paper-and-pencil tasks measuring well known and reliable psychological phenomena. Self-esteem was found to moderate three out of six phenomena that were replicated. These were (1) acceptance of more responsibility for desired than for undesired outcomes, (2) the false-consensus effect, and (3) unrealistic optimism concerning future life events. The results show that when subjects with a wide range in self-esteem are tested, self-esteem is an important moderator of social behavior.

Self-esteem is widely perceived to be important. People hoping to raise their self-esteem have their pick of dozens of self-help books, or special cassette tapes filled with their choice of audible or subliminal messages. The state of California even has a budget line for the the study of self-esteem

Among social psychologists there is more disagreement about the importance of self-esteem Some researchers, such as Epstein (1980), Greenwald, Bellezza, and Banaji (1988) and Swann (1985) believe that self-esteem moderates many social behaviors. Others believe that the importance of self-esteem is often overstated. For example, McGuire and Padawer-Singer (1976) noted that although the majority of research on the self-concept has examined self-esteem there is very little evidence to indicate that self esteem plays the role of a moderating variable in social behavior.

The lack of consensus may be due partly to the distribution of self-esteem in typical research populations. Most college students have moderate to high self-esteem. Accordingly, little variation in self-esteem is displayed in typical college student subject samples. In such samples, when a median split is used to define groups characterized as low and high in self-esteem the lower group is likely to consist largely of persons with positive self-attitudes. When regression analyses are used, the relationship of self-esteem to other variables is also likely to be underestimated due to a restricted range of observed self-esteem scores.

The aim of the present research was to examine the role of self-esteem as a moderator of social behavior, and to do so in a sample selected to represent a broad range on the self-esteem dimension. More specifically, we pretested a large group of subjects and selected samples representing low, medium and high levels of self-esteem Moderating effects of self-esteem were then tested for seven phenomena that are so commonly obtained in social psychological research that they are considered to represent "normal" social behavior. Our goal was to determine if persons with low self-esteem would show these "normal" behaviors in the same fashion expected for general samples.

**Subjects.** In the pretest, 1051 students completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale, the Beck Depression Inventory, and an 8 item attitude survey. A single factor extracted from the Rosenberg and Beck scores accounted for 85% of the total variance; scores on this factor were used in all further analyses as the measure of Self-esteem.

The factor scores showed the expected skewed distribution (see Figure 1). Low self-esteem subjects were defined as those subjects scoring in the lowest 10% of the distribution, medium self-esteem subjects scored in the middle 10%, and high self-esteem subjects scored in the top

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10%. Note that both the medium and high groups have scores above the point that indicates a neutral self-attitude.

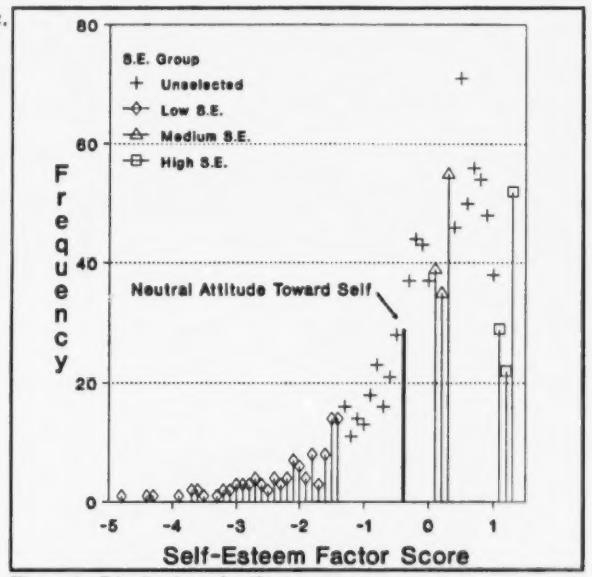


**Figure 1.** Distribution of self-esteem scores.

**Procedure.** In the second portion of the study, subjects completed a packet of tasks measuring 7 social psychological effects. The effects tested were:

(1) *Attitude-consistent cognitive responding to persuasion*: More favorable response to agreeable than disagreeable persuasive arguments.

(2) *Primacy in impression formation*: Greater weighting of information received first in impression formation.

(3) *Counter-attitudinal role playing effect*: Opinion change following voluntary agreement to write counter-attitudinal essays.

(4) *Beneffectance*: Accepting more responsibility for desired than for undesired outcomes.

(5) *Attitude similarity/attraction*: Attraction to attitudinally similar others.

(6) *False-consensus effect*: Overestimation of opinion agreement with others.

(7) *Unrealistic optimism*. Inflated judged likelihood of desirable future events, and diminished expectation of undesirable events.

Although I won't take the time to explain in detail, there was a plausible rationale for expecting that each of these standard effects might be moderated by self-esteem -- which is to say that the effect might be manifest differently in our three subsamples.

**Results.** For each phenomenon we were looking, first, to see that our procedures replicated the expected effect, and second, to determine whether the strength or direction of the effect varied as a function of self-esteem.

The first effect examined was attitude-consistency of cognitive responses to persuasive arguments. We did replicate the expected attitude-consistency effect. However, self-esteem did not moderate the effect. Similarly, for the primacy effect test, we obtained a significant primacy effect, but it too was not moderated by self-esteem

**Counter-attitudinal role playing.** Opinion change following counter-attitudinal role playing was the only task that failed to replicate the expected finding. No opinion change was found in

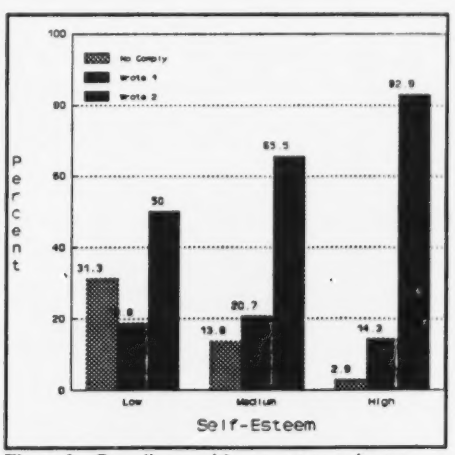


**Figure 2.** Compliance with request to write two essays contrary to own views.

any self-esteem group, making it impossible to draw conclusions about the moderating effect of self-esteem on this phenomenon.

Unexpectedly, we found that the three self-esteem groups complied to different degrees with the requests to write two counter-attitudinal essays (see Figure 2). Only 50% of the low self-esteem subjects agreed to write such essays, whereas 83% of the high self-esteem subjects complied with both requests.

**Beneffectance.** In the beneffectance task subjects were asked to recall occasions in which they received grades that were much higher or lower than they expected, and occasions in which persons they had just met were much more friendly or unfriendly than expected.

Beneffectance for the academic events was significantly moderated by self-esteem High self-esteem subjects accepted more responsibility for good grades than bad, while low self-esteem subjects showed an opposite pattern, taking slightly more responsibility for bad grades than for good. (See Figure 3).

In contrast, beneffectance for social events was not moderated by self-esteem All three groups showed the expected effect of taking more responsibility for friendly than for unfriendly reactions. (See Figure 3).

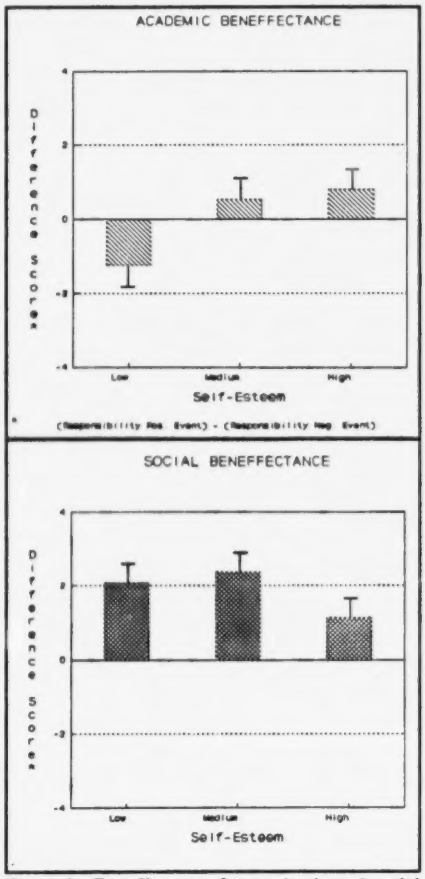


**Figure 3.** Beneffectance for academic and social events.

**Attitude similarity and attraction.** The attitude similarity/attraction effect was tested by having subjects rate their liking for several other members of the subject pool, based on those (stimulus) persons' responses to the 8-item attitude survey. The stimulus persons were selected to represent a wide range of values on a liberalism/conservatism factor score derived from the 8 attitude measures.

Similarity, the difference between the subject's and the target's factor scores, was found to be correlated with liking ratings, and the strength of this correlation was significantly moderated by self-esteem (see Figure 4). Notice, however, that similarity was more highly correlated with the attraction ratings of the *low* self-esteem group than with the ratings of the high self-esteem group. One might expect that persons who did not like themselves would also dislike others who were similar. In fact, the opposite effect was shown here.

In another analysis of these data, we calculated similarity as the sum of the differences between the subject's and the target's responses to all eight attitude items. Here again, similarity and attraction were correlated. However, in this analysis the correlation was not moderated by self-esteem Due to

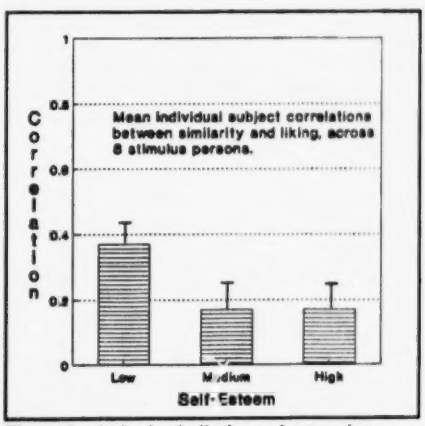


**Figure 4.** Attitude similarity and attraction.

the mixed results, a conclusion that self-esteem moderates the attitude similarity/attraction effect cannot be drawn.

**False Consensus.** For the false consensus task subjects rated the percentage of fellow students for or against each of the 8 attitudes measured in the pretest. These estimates were compared to the actual percentage in the pretested sample who stated they were for or against each view and a mean error was calculated.[1]

Errors in subjects' estimates of the prevalence of their own views were significantly moderated by self-esteem (see Figure 5). Judgments by subjects low in self-esteem showed patterns opposite to those generally reported. Low self-esteem subjects apparently underestimated the prevalence of their opinions in the subject population. In contrast, high self-esteem subjects showed the typical pattern of overestimating the prevalence of their views.

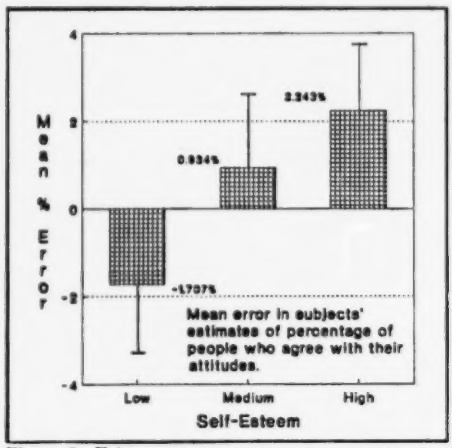


**Figure 5.** False consensus.

**Unrealistic Optimism.** To measure unrealistic optimism we asked subjects to rate the likelihood, compared to other students at the U.W., that 20 negative and 20 positive life events would happen to them. Optimism for both positive and negative events was significantly moderated by self-esteem (see Figure 6). Persons with high self-esteem rated positive events as about 1.5 times more likely to happen to them than to someone else, while those low in self-esteem were actually pessimistic, rating positive events as somewhat less likely to happen to them than to others.

All three groups believed that undesirable events were less likely to happen to them than to others. However, high self-esteem subjects believed negative events were even less likely to happen to them than did low and medium self-esteem subjects.

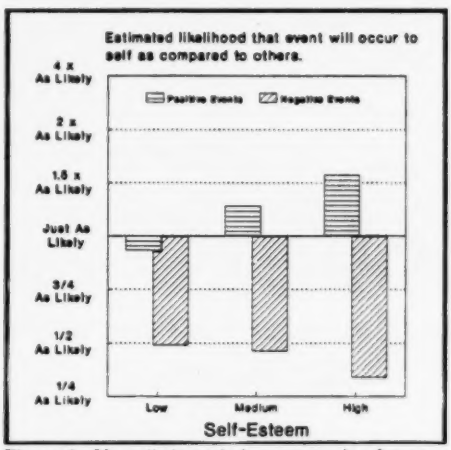


**Figure 6.** Unrealistic optimism concerning future events.

**Discussion.** Table 1 provides a summary of the results. Three phenomena were moderated significantly by self-esteem: beneffectance for academic events, false consensus, and unrealistic optimism. Three other phenomena were not moderated by self-esteem: attitude-consistency of cognitive responses to persuasion, primacy in impression formation, and beneffectance for social events. No conclusions could be drawn about possible moderating effects of self-esteem on two other phenomena: opinion change following counterattitudinal role playing and attitude similarity/attraction. Lastly, there was one unexepcted observation of a result moderated by self-esteem: high self-esteem subjects were more likely than low self-esteem subjects to show the usual pattern of agreeing to write counterattitudinal essays.

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[1] Issues concerning the true nature and appropriate description of the false-consensus effect (see Dawes, 1988) are tangential to our examination of individual differences in self-esteem on perceived consensus.

Table 1. Summary of results.

| | Effect Replicated? | Moderated by Self-Esteem? |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Cognitive Responses To Persuasion | Y | N |
| 2. The Primacy Effect | Y | N |
| 3. Dissonance Reduction in Counter-Attitudinal Role Playing | N | ? |
| Compliance With Request To Write | - | Y |
| 4. Beneffectance For Academic Events | Y | Y |
| Beneffectance For Social Events | Y | N |
| 5. Attraction to Attitudinally Similar Others | Y | ? |
| 6. The False Consensus Effect | Y | Y |
| 7. Unrealistic Optimism Concerning Future Events | Y | Y |

It is important to note that for each of the three effects that were moderated by self-esteem the low self-esteem group showed patterns of results directly opposite to those generally reported in the literature.

It is also interesting that the three tasks for which self-esteem had a moderating effect were ones in which subjects used the self as a reference point in judgments. Contrast this with the cognitive response and primacy tasks, which showed no moderation by self-esteem In these tasks subjects were merely asked to make direct judgments of stimuli, without explicit self-reference.

Considered as a whole, the results of this study make a strong case for the importance of self-esteem as a moderator of many social behaviors. By selecting subjects from a large pretested sample, we were able to collect a subsample who reported negative self-evaluations. These subjects showed behavior significantly different from that of subjects with moderate or high self-esteem on several tasks that assessed standard or "normal" social behavior and judgment. These results support the view that self-esteem is an important moderating variable in behavior. In other words, some effects that are understood to represent "normal" social behavior are displayed only by subjects who have positive self-regard.

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